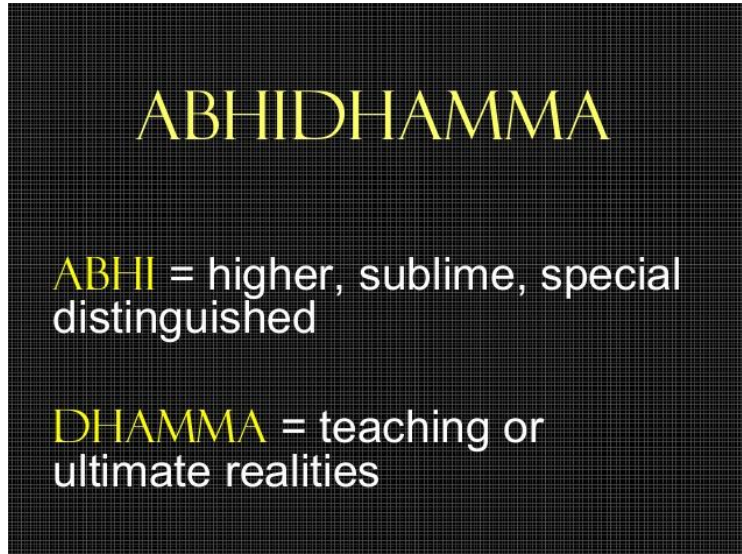


What is Abhidhamma?

What is Abhidhamma? Is it philosophy? Is it psychology? Is it ethics? Nobody knows.



Sayādaw U Thittila is a Burmese monk who said, "It is a philosophy in as much as it deals with the most general causes and principles that govern all things." So it can be called a philosophy. You find in it the causes and principles that govern all things. "It is an ethical system because it enables one to realize the ultimate goal, Nibbāna." There are no ethical teachings in

Abhidhamma actually. There are no teachings like 'you are not to do this or that, you are to refrain from this'. There are no such teachings in Abhidhamma. But when it describes consciousness, it begins with what is unwholesome. It goes to consciousness of sensuous sphere. Then it goes to higher states of consciousness called fine material-sphere consciousness. Then again it goes to immaterial-sphere types of consciousness. And ultimately it goes to Supra-mundane consciousness. It goes from one spiritual stage to another. So it can be called ethics.

"As it (Abhidhamma) deals with the working of the mind with thought processes and mental factors it can be called a system of psychology." It is really a system of psychology because it deals with mind, matter, consciousness, mental factors and material properties. "Therefore Abhidhamma is generally translated as psycho-ethical philosophy of Buddhism." When we say it is Buddhist psychology, it is psychology, but it is more than that. We may call it 'philosophy'; again it is more than that. We may call it 'ethics'; it is 'ethics', but it is more than that. So, we will never do justice to translate it as psychology, philosophy or ethics. In Abhidhamma you find something of philosophy, much of psychology and also of ethics.

The Importance of Abhidhamma

Is the knowledge of Abhidhamma important? If you ask me, I will say, "Yes". Abhidhamma is not only necessary in my opinion but essential for a correct and thorough understanding of Buddha's teachings. Please do not be discouraged when I say this. You will not understand the Suttas correctly and thoroughly if you do not understand the teachings of Abhidhamma. Many teachings in the Suttas have to be understood against the background of Abhidhamma. It is something like a guide or guideline for understanding the teachings in the Suttas.

In Dhammapada (this is a Sutta) the Buddha said, "Do not do any evil or do not do what is bad; do what is good." If we are to avoid evil, we need to know what is evil, what is unwholesome. Sometimes we may think something is wholesome, while actually it is unwholesome. Or sometimes we may think something is unwholesome, while it is wholesome. We need to understand which is evil and which is good. That we can understand with the help of Abhidhamma.

Abhidhamma teaches us that whatever is associated with greed, hatred and delusion is evil, is unwholesome. Whatever is associated with the opposites of these three unwholesome states, that is, non-greed, non-hatred (that means loving-kindness) and non-delusion or knowledge or understanding is wholesome. If you don't know Abhidhamma, you may be at a loss as to what is evil and what is not.

In some Suttas Buddha said, "A monk develops the Path." Path consciousness is a type of consciousness that arises at the moment of enlightenment. According to Abhidhamma, Path consciousness arises only once. It never repeats. In that Sutta the Buddha said, "The monk develops the Path." But according to the teachings of Abhidhamma, Path consciousness only arises once. The meaning to understand there is that the monk practises meditation further to reach the higher stages of enlightenment, to reach the higher Paths.

If we do not understand that, we will understand it incorrectly. There are many places like this in the Suttas. Without the knowledge of Abhidhamma you will always misunderstand or you will not fully understand. So, in my opinion the Abhidhamma is

essential for the correct understanding and for the thorough understanding of the teachings given in the Suttas.

Is Knowledge of Abhidhamma Essential for Meditation?

When we want to practise meditation, do we need the knowledge of Abhidhamma? There can be different answers — **yes and no**.

There is a book called *Visuddhimagga*. It was written by the Venerable Buddhaghosa in the fifth century A.D. It is actually a handbook for meditating monks. It describes the practice of meditation from the foundation of purity of morals up to the attainment of enlightenment. When describing Vipassanā meditation⁴, the author taught in that book the essentials of Abhidhamma — about aggregates, bases, elements, faculties, Paṭicca-samuppāda (Dependent Origination). He said this is the basis for knowledge. Knowledge means Vipassanā knowledge. Just looking at it we might conclude that we must study Abhidhamma before we can practise Vipassanā meditation. But when we look at the stories where a person came to the Buddha and the Buddha preached to him and he gained enlightenment or he became an Ariya, he did not know Abhidhamma. Still he became enlightened but you need the help of the experienced teacher for it. So in my opinion knowledge of Abhidhamma is not absolutely essential for realization of truth. Even if you do not know Abhidhamma, you can practise Vipassanā and you can get results. It is extremely helpful, however, to have knowledge of Abhidhamma. It is like reading a map before you go to a place. When you reach that place, you don't have to be told because you already know which is which. It is something like that. Knowledge of Abhidhamma is very helpful. It is good, as you are doing now, to study the Abhidhamma a little before you practise meditation. But there are some teachers who think that it is essential. You must know Abhidhamma before you practise Vipassanā. Knowledge of Abhidhamma is good to have.

What is Truth?

There are mainly two kinds of truth recognized in Buddhism or in the teachings of the Buddha. Whenever people talk about truth, they say there is only one truth. Different people interpret it in different ways. But since different people interpret it in different

ways, there cannot be one truth, but there are many truths. If you ask a Christian what truth is, you get one answer. If you ask a Hindu, you will get a still different answer. So truth can be different depending upon what kind of person you ask.

According to Buddhism, truth means simply something that is true, that is real either in the conventional sense or in the ultimate sense. Some things are true only according to the convention, only according to the usage or mode of expression accepted by a certain group of people or accepted by people at large. Some are true according to the ultimate sense. Whether it is true according to convention or according to ultimate sense, it is called truth or it is called reality in Buddhism.

Since something which is true, which is real, is called truth, truth need not be good only. Truth need not be lofty only. It can be anything which is true as it is described. It is supported by the fact that craving which is an unwholesome mental state is taught by

According to the Abhidhamma philosophy there are two types of Truth:

- Conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*)
- Ultimate Truth (*paramattha sacca*)

the Buddha as the Second Noble Truth. The Second Noble Truth is craving. Craving is an unwholesome mental state which gives bad results, which is bad, which is not lofty. Still it is called truth in Buddhism. So truth need not necessarily be good or lofty. It may be good or it may be bad. It may be lofty or it may be lowly, but it must

be true. When I say the fire burns, the burning is the truth of fire. That is truth. So in Buddhism craving is the truth. Mindfulness — you all practise mindfulness meditation — is the truth. Wisdom is truth. Concentration is truth. In Buddhism truth need not be good only. It may be either good or bad, lofty or lowly. Whatever is true in the conventional sense or in the ultimate sense is truth.

What is conventional truth?

Conventional truth is that which conforms to the convention or usage of the world. Now in the beginning, in the early days of human life on this earth, by common consent a name for something is accepted. That name was accepted by all people. A thing comes to be known by that name. For example, a certain kind of animal is known as, or is designated as 'a cat'. That was accepted by all the people. If you want to refer to that animal, you say the word 'cat'. That is conventional. Conventional truth is something which is accepted by the people at large. It is accepted by 'common consent'. I was afraid of using the expression 'common consent' before. To be exact just yesterday I picked up this book and there that very expression is given. So I was glad. It is said there: "People have simply agreed by common consent that a particular group of written letters or oral sounds shall represent or stand for a particular object or idea."

We can have common consent. That is agreement by all people: Let us call this a man. Let us call this a woman. Let us call this a cat, a dog and so on. That is conventional truth. Suppose there is a cat here. Then I say, "There is a cat." I am telling the truth. I am not telling you a lie because the animal which is accepted as a cat is here. That is one kind of truth which is conventional truth or conventional reality. Or we can take the example of a car. How did you come here? You came in a car. When you say you came in a car, you are not lying to me. You are telling the truth, the conventional truth. It's true that you came in a car. The conventional truth 'car' or the thing represented by the name 'car' is a reality, a conventional reality. The same is true for a house, a man, a woman. You can give as many examples as you like.

Everything in the world which is given a name can be a conventional truth. This conventional truth is called Sammuti-sacca in Pāḷi. I want you to be familiar with these words, Sammuti-sacca. 'Sammuti' means just common concept or common agreement. 'Sacca' means truth. You may have met with a phrase 'Cattāri Ariyasaccāni'. The word 'Sacca' is truth. This kind of truth is called Sammuti-sacca or conventional reality.

Sammuti-sacca is also called Paññatti. Paññatti is translated as concept. Venerable Ñāṇamoli in his translation of the Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification, gives some

information about the concepts, Paññatti. He concluded that, "All this shows that the word 'paññatti' carries the meanings of either appellation or concept or both together, and that no English word quite corresponds." (Visuddhimagga, VIII, n.11, p.781)

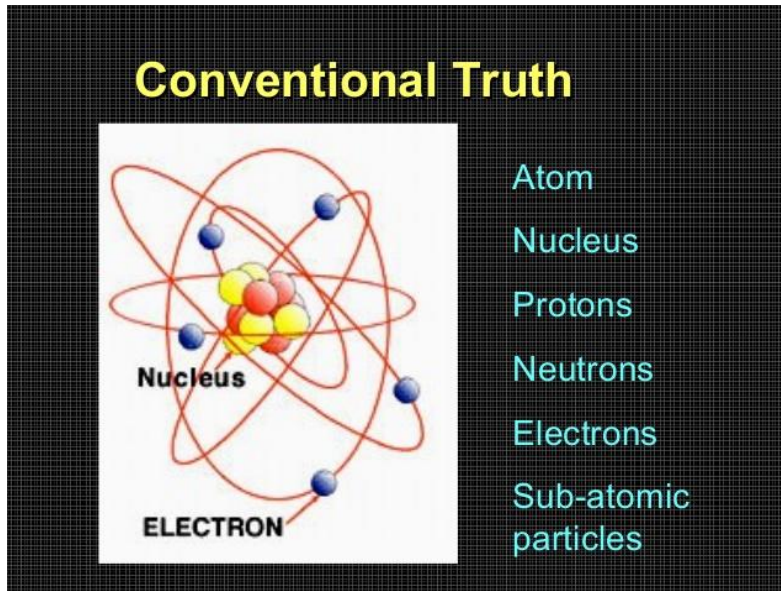
There is no English word which corresponds squarely with the word 'Paññatti'. Let us accept the word 'concept' as the translation of this word.

Two kinds of concepts

The conventional truth is also called Paññatti. There are two kinds of Paññatti. This much I think you need to understand. If you are impatient, if you want to know more about Paññatti, you can read the end of the eighth chapter of this book (Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha) (also see CMA, VIII, §§29-32, p.325-328). We just need to understand two kinds of Paññatti, two kinds of concepts. The first one is called Nāma-paññatti. Nāma here means name. The word 'Nāma' means name or mind, mental phenomena. But here it means name. Therefore, Nāma-paññatti means name-concept. Name-concept means just the names given to objects. These names make things known. Therefore, they are called in Pāli 'Nāma-paññatti'. The word 'Paññatti' has two meanings. One is active and the other is passive. 'Paññatti' means something that makes some other thing known. When we say 'car', the name 'car' makes the real car known. By the word 'car' we know the real thing, a vehicle with four wheels and so on. 'Paññatti' here means something that makes some other thing known, a name that makes things known. Nāma-paññatti is names given to objects. There are thousands and thousands of Nāma-paññattis. Here in this room you can have how many Paññattis? You may find ten, twenty, thirty. Any name given to a thing or to a being is called Nāma-paññatti. A man, a woman, a house, a camera, a tape recorder they are called Nāma-paññatti.

The second one is called Attha-paññatti. 'Attha' means here a thing. Attha-paññatti is thing-concept. That means the objects conveyed by the names or concepts are Atthapaññatti. That means the objects represented by these names. They are called Paññatti because they are made known. Here we get the passive meaning of the word 'Paññatti'. Sometimes it is good to have two meanings to a word. But sometimes it is

confusing because it can mean both things. So we have to understand which meaning is being used in a given context. In the word 'Attha-paññatti' the word 'Paññatti' means something which is made known, something which is made known by a Nāma-paññatti, by the name. Again let us take the example car. We have the name 'car'. And we have the thing which we call 'a car'. That thing is Attha-paññatti, thing-concept. The name 'car' is Nāma-paññatti. In most cases there are always these two Paññattis going



together — Nāma-paññatti and Attha-paññatti. A house — the name 'house' is Nāma-paññatti. The real house, the house itself, is Attha-paññatti. A man — the name 'man' is Nāma-paññatti. The person, the man is Attha-paññatti. In most cases we can get both Nāma-paññatti and Attha-paññatti for these things.

When we say objects, we mean both mental and physical objects. Mental states are objects. Material states are objects. What about the name given to a mental state called contact? It is Phassa. That mental contact, the contact of mind with the object, with respect to that mental factor, can we get two Paññattis there, Nāma-paññatti and Attha-paññatti? We have not come to Paramattha, ultimate truth yet. Contact or Phassa is one of the ultimate realities. So in the case of Phassa we can have Nāma-paññatti because Phassa is a name. The contact itself, however, is not called Attha-paññatti. It is Paramattha. It is ultimate truth. With regard to names given to those belonging to ultimate truth we can have Nāmapaññatti and Paramattha, ultimate truth — not Nāma-paññatti and Attha-paññatti. With regard to other things, those that do not belong to ultimate reality, there can be these two concepts or Paññattis, Nāma-paññatti and Attha-paññatti. You can see many Nāma-paññattis and Attha-paññattis all around you.

These concepts, these conventional usages we cannot do away with them. We cannot avoid using conventional terms, conventional language when we communicate with

other people. That is because we live in this conventional world. We have to use the terms of convention to make the meanings known to other people. Otherwise there would be great confusion. A man is made up of five aggregates. A woman is also a group of five aggregates. If one says a group of five aggregates comes to the monastery, you don't know if it is a man or a woman. So we cannot do away with conventional terms when we speak, when we communicate with each other. But we must understand what ultimate reality we are talking about when we use these conventional terms.

Concepts are timeless

Concepts are said to be out of time, beyond time, timeless. There are people who want to argue against this. Paññatti or convention or concept has no existence of its own, in its own right. What is Paññatti? You cannot grasp it in your hands. For example, a name — a name is a name. We cannot say a name arises, stays for some time and disappears. A name is a name because it is in our minds.

They are products of mental construction. We think of them as something and then we use that designation. Since it is said to exist only in our minds, it actually has no reality, no existence. That is why it cannot be said that concept is past, or concept is present, or concept is future. It is beyond this time frame. That is why Paññatti is said to be timeless. Only these phenomena which have an arising, and then a static stage, and a disappearing, only those that have these stages are said to be existent. Those that do not have these three — arising, aging and dying — if something does not have these three phases of existence, we do not say it exists. The convention or the names given to the things and the things themselves are said to be non-existent in reality. As a man you exist. A man is a convention or a concept. The name is a concept and the person is also a concept. The person does not really exist.

What really exists is the five aggregates. But we call this group of five aggregates a man, a woman, a person, a being and so on. A man, a woman, an animal or whatever is only our mental projections or mental constructions. We think of them as existing although actually they do not exist in the ultimate sense. In the conventional sense they

exist. Since concepts have no arising, no aging and no disappearing, they are said to be out of time. They are timeless. So Paññatti is said to be timeless, like Nibbāna. Nibbāna has no beginning, no arising. So it has no disappearing, no end. That is why Nibbāna is also called timeless. In the same way, Paññatti is called timeless.

We may say if we call something by some name that it arises at that moment. Let's take a car. Somebody invented a car and then he called it a car. You may argue that the convention or Paññatti 'car' arises at that time. Actually since the Paññatti is in your mind only and is not an ultimate thing, we cannot say that it arose at that moment or that it exists. We can understand more with names. You give a name to a child. You call it by that name. But we cannot say when that name first came into being. And then when people use that name it seems to exist. When people forget that name, it seems to disappear. Later on somebody will come and say there was such a person by this name perhaps a hundred years ago. We then remember that name again. So that name which is a concept is beyond time. It is not present, not past and not future. So it is timeless.

What is ultimate truth?

Ultimate truth is that which conforms to reality. It is said that if it is reducible, it is not an ultimate truth. Ultimate truth is that which is irreducible. It is the last thing which you cannot reduce any further. That is the ultimate truth.

A person or let us say a man, the name 'man' is a name-concept. The person is a thing-concept. What is real in that person is the five aggregates. These five aggregates have a beginning. Also they age. And ultimately they die. They have this existence of their own, existence in their own right. So they are called ultimate reality. If we reduce what we call a person to the irreducible elements, we get the five aggregates or we can say we get mind and matter. The five aggregates or the members of these five aggregates are called ultimate truth because they are real. They have a real existence. They have an existence in their own right.

Consciousness means Citta. Citta would be an ultimate truth. It really is. It has the three phases of existence — arising, aging and disappearing. After remaining for these

three phases or these three stages, one consciousness disappears and then another consciousness arises. Since consciousness has arising, aging and disappearing, we say that it exists in the ultimate sense. Ultimate truth is that which conforms to reality. It is called Paramattha-sacca in Pāḷi. Paramattha is defined as the ultimate or correct thing. We can say ultimate or correct reality. Why? Because it is real as it is. It is not otherwise than is stated. It is not turned round. It is not the reverse of what it is said to be. It is not the opposite of what it is said to be. It is not wrong. That is what we call the ultimate thing or the ultimate truth. When we say there is consciousness, there really is consciousness. Consciousness really exists. So consciousness is said to be the ultimate truth.

The ultimate truth is not like things in magic shows or in mirrors. At magic shows they will produce something out of nothing. We think they are producing a real thing. But actually they are tricks. Sometimes they seem so real that we want to believe they are producing real things. Things shown at magic shows are not real. They are just illusions. In the same way, what we call a man, or a woman, or a car, or a house is an illusion. It is not a real thing. But what is real is the components contained in these things.

I think you have seen a mirage. It is like water. From a distance people who see it may think there is water there. You follow the water, but you never get to that place. It moves with yourself. In Pāḷi it is called 'deers' craving'. The deer see the mirage in the distance. When they are thirsty, they will follow the mirage until they fall and die. A mirage is not a real thing. If you have seen it, it looks like it is real. It looks like there is water up there. When you get closer to it, it moves further and further away from you. That is an illusion.

Paramattha, the ultimate thing, is not like that. It is real and it really exists. That is why it is called ultimate thing. Another meaning of Paramattha is it can be seen by oneself. It can be realized by oneself. We can say it is to be seen by oneself. It is to be experienced by oneself. The ultimate realities can be seen by ourselves, by us. They can be experienced by us. Ultimate realities are not like things known by hearsay which may or may not be true. When we hear something about somebody from someone, it may or may not be true because it is hearsay. We cannot be sure that it is really true.

It may be false. We have not seen it for ourselves. Once we see it for ourselves, then we know it really is. Then we know it is true. Things we know from hearsay, things we know from report from others may or may not be true. Such things are not called Paramattha. In order to be called Paramattha they must be experienced by ourselves.

Let us take consciousness. Especially when you practise meditation, you know there is consciousness. You know that your mind goes out here and there. You can experience it or you can see it for yourself. It is not through reading books or attending talks, or by speculation, but by experience that you can see that. Some things, which are experienced by ourselves, are called ultimate truths. For example, feeling — it is too real. You sit for meditation and after some time you get pain there. Sometimes it becomes so intense that you have to give up. It is very real. You can experience it. You know that there is feeling. You know there is painful feeling. Or if you are happy, you know there is pleasurable feeling. You know it for yourself because you have experienced it for yourself. You don't have to go to another person to verify this. What you directly experience for yourself is called ultimate reality. Ultimate reality can be verified by one's own experience.

This definition shows that until we see them for ourselves, they are not ultimate realities for us. We may take, for example, Nibbāna. Nibbāna is the highest of the ultimate realities. Until we see Nibbāna for ourselves, until we realize Nibbāna for ourselves, it is not yet an ultimate reality for us. I may say, "May I attain Nibbāna" or "May you attain Nibbāna" or "I do this meritorious deed so I may get to Nibbāna." We always say that. When we say, "Nibbāna", the Nibbāna we are taking in our mind is not the real Nibbāna. It is just the name-concept, Nibbāna. But when we see it for ourselves, when we experience the enlightenment for ourselves, then we will know Nibbāna through direct experience. Only then will Nibbāna become ultimate reality for us. Until we reach that stage, although Nibbāna is an ultimate reality, it is not yet an ultimate reality for us.

For something to become an ultimate reality it must be real as it is stated. It must not be otherwise than is stated. If it is said there is consciousness, there is consciousness. Also it must be experienced by oneself. It is to be seen by oneself through direct

experience. There are similes or examples to explain ultimate reality and conventional reality. The most obvious is a house. What we call a house is not ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is the parts. Without these parts there can be no house. If you take away these parts one by one, you don't have a house. The same is true for a man. If you cut that man into pieces one by one, you lose the man. There is just a heap of different parts of the body. It is just a simile. What is real in a man is just the parts and not the whole. Without the parts there is no whole.

Another example is a circle of fire. That is very obvious. Does a circle of fire really exist? If I pick up a torch and move it round, you say that you see a circle of fire. But you know there is no circle of fire. There is fire at different places on the circumference of the circle. Your mind takes all these points and constructs a whole circle. Actually there is no circle of fire. Everybody knows that. The circle of fire is Paññatti. It does not really exist. What really exists is the light of the fire at different places one at a time, one at each moment. We are so adept at constructing these thoughts, these images into a whole that we think we see a circle of fire. But actually we don't see a circle of fire. That is because our minds work very, very fast. We don't realize it when we are ordinarily talking or speaking. When we consider a child learning to read, we can see how the mind works very quickly. When a child learns to read, it has to spell. It cannot read right away. He has to spell out the word 'two', for example. Then he knows it is the word 'two', but now you know it right away. You don't have to think of anything. You think you don't have to construct it. It is like second nature to you. You just read the word, the word 'two' or a long word like 'comprehension' or 'meditation' or whatever. In order to read a long word like 'comprehension', you have to read all the letters. Then your mind constructs or composes all these letters into one whole. For a child it may take two seconds, but for you it does not take even a second. This thinking is always with us, but with things familiar to us we are not aware of that thinking. With things unfamiliar to us such thinking becomes apparent.

Let us look at a line of ants. Is there a line of ants? You take the individual ants away and you lose the line. There is no line of ants. But people say, "I see a line of ants." Our mind constructs it into a line, but actually there is no line of ants. A line is a concept. A line is an illusion. Only the individual ants are real. A piece of rope is made up of small

fibers or strands. If you take away the small strands one by one, you will not have a rope at all. What really exists is just the small threads, just the small strands. If you put them back together, then you say there is a rope. What you call a rope actually is an illusion. What exists are those threads or small fibers. You look at a river and you think the water is always there. You know that every second there is new water flowing. There are many similes to demonstrate the ultimate truth and the conventional truth. These are just some of the similes. For example, a car, we say that a car is a convention and the parts are ultimate truth. Of course even the parts are not ultimate truth yet. If you break it down to the smallest particle, that particle is the ultimate truth. The smallest particle of matter is the ultimate truth.

